

Making Your Own Drum Video

BY WES CRAWFORD

Never mind a featured role opposite Angelina Jolie in her next film; how many of you feel that the epitome of an appearance on the big (or small) screen involves *you* starring in your own drum video? If you believe the chances for either of the above scenarios are next to impossible, let me tell you how I succeeded in the second one.

The digital age has revolutionized the video industry, similarly to the audio recording industry, to the point that less than \$10,000 worth of gear can often accomplish today what \$100,000+ accomplished only a few years ago. Without listing all of the camera and editing possibilities currently available (which are better covered by numerous trade magazines), I would like to recount my adventure concocting, planning, scripting, gathering resources for, filming, editing, authoring, and marketing my own commercial DVD.

THE IDEA

When I looked at the drum video market (hundreds of titles), I saw three categories: 1. historical/retrospective videos about famous drummers or musical periods; 2. "star" videos featuring drummers who tend to "Wow!" the viewer with awesome displays of technique; and 3. "training" or instructional videos by both popular and lesser-known drummers who explain and demonstrate drumming concepts.

Many videos contain elements of more than one category, but most seem to belong primarily to one of those categories. Hence, the first question an aspiring drum video producer should ask is, "Which category is best for me?"

If you are interested in documentaries, music history, biographies, and the like, then the first category might be a good fit. If you are at least regionally known and believe you have some drumming techniques that are unique or possibly of Olympic quality, then the second category might be logical. Finally, if you have teaching experience and believe you have a clear manner of explaining an interesting drum subject, then consider the third category.

Once you have decided upon a type of drum video, it is important to formalize an idea for subject and content. The idea must be original, or at least expand in some important manner upon prior topics. It is also important to consider the characteristics of

your target market, as these may affect the feasibility of your idea.

It may be instructive to explain my video category, idea, and target market. I chose the instructional/training video category since I have neither a national reputation nor any exceptional expertise in music history or drumming technique, but I do teach drumset along with my active performance schedule. My next challenge was finding my subject idea. As I contemplated my students' needs, I recognized that many of them performed wonderfully in their lessons and with play-along audio recordings, but lacked confidence in their abilities when jamming with their friends. I realized that I could create a

Don't borrow a couple of camcorders and expect your results to look like one of your favorite movies, unless it happens to be *Blair Witch Project*.

virtual band on video for students to perform with, thus combining the decades-old audio play-along concept with the power and realism of contemporary video.

The next step was to research my potential target market. I learned that the largest demographic of drumset players is kids and teenagers, and the fastest *growing* demographic of drumset buyers is adults desiring to begin or rekindle a drumming hobby. These demographics, respectively, represent drummers who may not be old enough to perform in nightclubs and those who may not wish to perform late nights due to occupational and family demands. Since these sizable groups could reasonably enjoy and learn from an on-demand virtual band, I felt that my idea gelled with its target market.

RESOURCES

A professional video might cost from \$10,000–50,000 or more. Anything you can accomplish on your own will save money down the line *if* you have competence in each task. For instance, if you rent several video cameras and take care to set up complementary shots, you may not need to hire a film crew. However, you may end up with bad lighting, unmatched cameras, focus problems, etc. if you are inexperienced.

Don't borrow a couple of camcorders from friends and expect your results to look like

one of your favorite movies, unless that film happens to be *Blair Witch Project*! You may save money and work "off the clock" by buying one of the high-quality computer-editing packages now available to consumers, but expect a steep learning curve.

So, how does one approach professional quality while living on a musician's budget? If borrowing from a bank is not an option, then perhaps my solution will work for you: Look for partners. You will need a business plan detailing the general drum video market, your idea, your target market, your production needs with estimated costs, your projected reproduction costs, your marketing plans, and your best- and worst-case sales scenarios.

A business plan offers at least two benefits: 1. It will get you to really think and focus on every detail of your idea, and it will help you stay on course; 2. It spells out in writing just what you are up to. This is most valuable in getting partners on board. Loan officers won't even

talk to you without seeing your business plan. There are a multitude of good books available on writing business plans.

The good news is that there are lots of people with professional or semi-professional video and editing gear out there looking for experience or with extra time. Ask around and network to find people with the requisite skills to fulfill your project needs. Then present your plan and see who might be interested in working within your budget, through bartering services, and/or partnering with you on financial speculation.

Using this method, I found that I knew the creative director at a video production facility who was willing to help "on spec," as was one of my favorite audio engineers, and a fellow drummer/songwriter. I then bartered some musical services with a cameraman for some location filming. A written agreement outlining responsibilities, expectations, and profit sharing was agreed upon. In this manner I feel that we created the best possible quality video while staying within a reasonable personal budget. Still, expect cost over-runs!

THE SCRIPT

A script is absolutely necessary for smooth filming and editing. The script may be little more than an outline with lots of narrative and musical improvisation or it may be fine-

finely detailed. Consider it to be a work-in-progress up to the minute you finish the video, as circumstances may force changes and newer ideas may develop.

Remember to entertain. My guiding principle was to create a script that was serious in instructional content but also lighthearted and fun.

FILMING

Plan your shots with a storyboard in advance. You do not need to be an artist; my stick figures worked well enough to show the camera operators the vision inside my head. Don't assume others see your vision with merely your verbal explanation.

Create a checklist of items and responsibilities ahead of time, consisting of everything necessary at the shoot. Don't forget to discuss wardrobe and lighting (which may affect each other), makeup, and, most importantly, audio considerations with the appropriate experts involved. Wouldn't it be ridiculous to capture great film footage and lousy audio for a drum video? Oh, and don't forget a hairbrush; I'll probably never live down the messed-up hair in my narration footage!

EDITING

You have just completed filming. You're almost finished, right? Wrong! Editing can be the most time-consuming (and expensive) task related to a video project. Some say a useful rule is to allow one hour of editing for every minute of final film, although this may vary depending upon your project's complexity.

Study your favorite drum videos for their editing style. Don't be tempted to go too "MTV" and try relentless, quick, zany shots if your intent is to showcase your visual content. Consider the feasibility of "live switching" where an experienced Director basically edits as the filming occurs, much like a live TV show. This may save a lot of money during the actual editing sessions, but you're pretty much stuck with the edit you end up with. In "live switching," a Director who knows something about music and drumming is invaluable! Watch out for editors who are not very experienced with music videos, since they often do not sync the music to the visuals as tightly as a musician would and should demand.

FEEDBACK

After completing the editing, but before authoring to DVD, it is a good idea to get some honest feedback from members of your target market, other drummers whom you respect, and video experts. You may still have time to address issues concerning clarity, audio mix, visual segues, titling, and the like. One criticism I took seriously is that

some drummers may find it difficult to bring their drumset, television, and DVD player together. I therefore included an audio CD of the play-along songs in the package. Listen to negative comments and act upon them if possible.

AUTHORING TO DVD

Almost all new drum videos are in DVD format, and popular past titles are quickly being converted as well. Authoring to DVD refers to the process of mastering the edited film to DVD format and setting up a menu system to navigate throughout the sections of the video. Depending upon the length of the edited film, the number of audio tracks, the extent of the graphic arts work, the number of video options, any Special Features, and the number of "chapters" necessary, this process may be quick and cheap or time consuming and costly.

I was told that my DVD menu was the most complex the company had ever developed. It contains over 20 chapters comprising musical and narrative sections for ten play-along songs. I also required three different audio options for each song: with drumset, without drumset for the play-along version, and without drumset but with a click track and my coaching/commentary for the "training wheels" version.

Compression is a major issue. Basically, the more content on the DVD, the more this information must be compressed in order to fit on the disc. Too much compression detracts from the quality of the video images, while not enough can cause freezing and other problems on playback. The trick is to compress as little as possible yet stay within industry standards.

Make sure you test the authored DVD thoroughly, trying out all of the menu functions and their interactions, before committing to reproducing discs. Back up all of the edited footage in your computer to a hard drive and store it safely.

DUPLICATING/REPLICATING

Once you have a fully edited and authored DVD, you are ready to make copies. You have two choices: duplicate or replicate. When you duplicate your DVD you use DVD-R or DVD+R media for small orders (usually under 500), which as of this time does not play equally well in all DVD players. I first ordered 55 DVD-Rs, which was a mistake because their performance in peoples' players ranged from excellent, to frequent "freezing," to "skipping," to several players that would not recognize the disc!

The advantage of DVD-R/+R duplication is that you can generally duplicate in any quantity desired, although the price per disc drops considerably with larger quantities. Replicating DVDs, on the other hand, often

requires a higher cash outlay with an order of at least 500-1,000 discs. However, the price per disc should be reasonable and they are generally store-bought movie quality. After disposing of my DVD-Rs as demos with the qualifier that "they might not work on all players," I replicated my next order.

ARTWORK

From the start of the project you should consider the artwork for the final product. Artwork and text need to be planned for the disc face, box cover, and for any inserts you have in mind. Don't assume that stills from the video will make good pictures for the artwork. The low resolution of the pictures may cause them to appear grainy. Bring a photographer or a personal digital camera to your video shoot and take pictures during filming as well as posed shots.

A professional graphics artist fluent with graphic arts computer programs is essential to acquiring a professional look for your product and may be necessary to meet the stringent requirements of a reputable printer. Demand a "proof" or sample of the printing of your artwork before authorizing the full print run.

Be sure to include a barcode on the back of your packaging (often now obtained for free from major replicating companies). Most retailers will not carry merchandise without a barcode.

MARKETING

Once you have obtained your DVD order you are only halfway finished with your project. Your DVD is practically useless if nobody knows that it exists, what it is about, and how to easily obtain it. We are now talking about *marketing*.

Perhaps the simplest and most cost-effective way to begin marketing your DVD is to create a Website containing pictures and information describing the product. Video excerpts may also be included. If you are not knowledgeable about creating Websites, ask around to find out who created some sites that you are particularly impressed with, or find a college student or recent graduate looking for experience. There are a multitude of Website providers who will hold your hand, step by step, to get this done at a very reasonable price.

If you live in or near a metropolitan area, concentrate your initial marketing energies there rather than diluting them across the country. More people probably know you better in your home city than elsewhere and will need less convincing to buy your product. Send out press releases to local media. If you can interest local publications or TV stations in doing a story about you and your creation, that will serve as free advertising. Make sure drum teachers, who work with

many individuals within your target market, know about or possess a copy of the DVD.

Approach drum retailers and ask them to carry your product. Don't rule out the possibility of a consignment deal initially, but make sure the retailer will accept responsibility for any unexplained loss of product due to shoplifting or otherwise.

Establish a retail price that is competitive with other, comparable DVDs. Remember that you may not have the same celebrity status as, say, Dennis Chambers, but *you* are in competition with such artists! After settling on a suggested retail price, come to an agreement on a wholesale price to the retailers, which may be as little as one-half the retail price. Don't forget to calculate your unit costs and expenses to assure that you are making a profit, if that is a goal.

As you expand to market your product nationally, compare advertising value among various avenues to your target market. With drum magazines, for instance, compare advertising costs, magazine circulation, competitors' advertising, etc. Several consecutive small ads are generally more effective than one big one for the same total price. Marketing studies show that consumers generally need to see a new brand or product at *least* three times before it will be noticed enough to be considered for purchase. Always keep your target market in focus so that your efforts result in maximum effect.

Traditional marketing can be very expensive. A new way to go is called "Guerrilla Music Marketing," and it can be very cost effective. Do a "Google" search on this.

LICENSING/DISTRIBUTION OPTIONS

Another approach for greatly expanding the visibility of your DVD involves securing a licensing or distribution deal with an established company. The advantages of licensing your DVD include:

1. Many more people see your video in stores and catalogues through the company's marketing machinery, thereby increasing the chances for higher sales and more exposure for you as an artist.

2. With high sales, you may have clout with the company in regards to future products or ideas, or you may better negotiate with other companies.

3. A cash advance on future royalties could be negotiated. This would help pay off any debt incurred during development of the video.

Disadvantages of a licensing deal include:

1. You will likely have to give up at least some artistic control of your product. This may mean you will not have much input into packaging and graphic art decisions, and it also may mean changes in the actual video content.

2. There is rarely a guarantee that the video will be promoted as heavily as you would like.

3. You may be "locked in" under contract such that you are not able to do business with other companies. Your product could essentially be shelved.

4. Your profit per sale would generally be limited to your royalty rate, which may reach 12% of *wholesale* cost at most.

A distribution deal, on the other hand, is more likely to allow retention of artistic control and may still net great exposure and sales for your video, but there are generally few advertising guarantees. The distribution company may simply list your video in its catalog and it would still be up to you to promote it. A distribution deal may be made with a video company or with a company that carries a wide variety of percussion products. You would be responsible for supplying the company with sufficient product.

Always consult a music-business lawyer before signing anything so that you understand all of the implications regarding the points of the contract.

Initially, I contacted local retailers in hopes that they would carry my product. To help convince them, I mentioned my upcoming ads in drumming magazines and I offered them free promotional posters as well as my services to demonstrate the play-along video in their stores.

I have spoken with major percussion distributors and was told that, since I am not a "household name" (drummers' households, that is!), they would not distribute my product until I can generate some sales and interest on my own. I am not actively looking for a licensing deal at this time, but may do so in the future. I have found most success in online sales and sales to public libraries, and I'm presently exploring online digital downloading options.

SUMMARY

I once thought that producing my own video would be impossible and not worth the effort. However, after sharing my idea, I was greatly encouraged by several musician friends to take action. I figured I could finish the project in three to six months—how naïve! Sixteen months later, I received my replication order! I often said, "If I had known there would be this many problems, that I would be so dependent upon others' schedules, and that I would spend so much time and money on this project, I would never have started it!" But that's not true; I'm currently writing a script for my *fourth* video! Why don't you join me in producing your own?

throughout the Washington, DC/Baltimore region with a variety of artists, and tours and records with Higher Octave/Narada artists Shahin & Sepehr. Wes also serves as Vice-President of the Maryland/Delaware PAS chapter. For more information visit www.WesCrawford.com.

Wes Crawford teaches drumset privately and at Goucher College, and he performs